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THE DEATH AND REVIVAL OF JIHADI IDEOLOGY

by

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13. ABSTRACT

Since its inception in 1988, al-Qaeda's ideological narrative has been a major factor in its ability to mobilize resources, gain new recruits, and garner support from the broader Muslim community. In its nearly three decades of existence, the global jihadi group has experienced great structural change and periods of social upheaval. From the Global War on Terror that weakened the organization's central leadership to the events of the Arab Spring that exposed the unpopularity of the group's ideological beliefs, al-Qaeda has remained resilient. Today, al-Qaeda's ideology is arguably its most important tool in its struggle against adversaries. This thesis analyzes al-Qaeda's public statements from its birth in Afghanistan to the present and tracks the changes in the group's framing practices. This thesis argues that al-Qaeda's central leadership has remained relevant and ensured its own survival by exploiting new opportunities and adjusting its public messaging campaign to accommodate changing strategic environments. The analysis of al-Qaeda's framing practices is important because the organization remains a major global security threat and its ideology and public messaging has contributed to the group's survival.

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THE DEATH AND REVIVAL OF JIHADI IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Since its inception in 1988, al-Qaeda's ideological narrative has been a major factor in its ability to mobilize resources, gain new recruits, and garner support from the broader Muslim community. In its nearly three decades of existence, the global jihadi group has experienced great structural change and periods of social upheaval. From the Global War on Terror that weakened the organization's central leadership to the events of the Arab Spring that exposed the unpopularity of the group's ideological beliefs, al-Qaeda has remained resilient. Today, al-Qaeda's ideology is arguably its most important tool in its struggle against adversaries. This thesis analyzes al-Qaeda's public statements from its birth in Afghanistan to the present and tracks the changes in the group's framing practices. This thesis argues that al-Qaeda's central leadership has remained relevant and ensured its own survival by exploiting new opportunities and adjusting its public messaging campaign to accommodate changing strategic environments. The analysis of al-Qaeda's framing practices is important because the organization remains a major global security threat and its ideology and public messaging has contributed to the group's survival.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQC	Al-Qaeda Central
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
GWOT	Global War on Terror
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IS	Islamic State
MENA	Middle East and North Africa

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I. THE EVOLUTION OF AL-QAEDA MESSAGE FRAMING

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Since the turn of the 21 century, the United States and its allies have been engaged in a battle against Muslim extremists who adhere to a global or transnational jihadi ideology. The global jihad movement, or the struggle against perceived external aggression toward the Muslim world, primarily directs its rhetoric and attacks against foreign enemies who support corrupt domestic regimes.[1] This relatively modern movement is associated closely with al Qaeda and in the past fifteen years the United States has worked to strategically deny this organization resources, political opportunities, and safe havens.[2] Combatting the global jihad ideology has taken a less prominent role however. It was not until the events of the Arab Spring in 2011 that popular public support for democratic transition offered a viable counter-ideological narrative to that posed by al Qaeda. Much has been written of the Arab Spring's promise to defeat Islamist global jihadi movements. Yet those movements are still alive and well. How has the Arab Spring affected global jihadism? Has the framing of prominent transnational jihadi movements changed as a result of the Arab Spring and its aftermath; if so, how?

Prior to the popular uprisings that toppled longstanding leaders in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, al-Qaeda and its affiliates consistently framed global jihad as the only viable strategy to depose corrupt domestic regimes.[3] With the initial success of these relatively non-violent protests, al-Qaeda's ideology appeared to be counterfactual; furthermore, popular public support for democratic elections appeared to affirm that there was little desire for a unified Islamic State under the direction of a caliphate. Because jihad against

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[1] "What is Jihadism?" *BBC News*, December 11, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30411519

[2] Brian Michael Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in is Third Decade: Irreversible Decline or Imminent Victory?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), vii, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP362.pdf

[3] Nelly Lahoud and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring," *Combating Terrorism Center* (2013), 5, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/CTC-Jihadi-Discourse-in-the-Wake-of-the-Arab-Spring-December2013.pdf.

the "far enemy"—i.e., the United States—is such a central tenet to the al-Qaeda movement, it is imperative to analyze the public statements and actions of the group's leadership to determine if they have attempted to re-frame their ideology to remain relevant in a post-Arab Spring environment, when change close to home became possible. If al-Qaeda has altered its framing, has such change contributed to the group's survival or is it a product of other factors taking place in the region?

B.   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

In 1996, al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden declared a defensive jihad against the United States and its allies.[4] His core grievances revolved around U.S. support for Israel, Western military presence in Saudi Arabia, and the international sanctions leveled against Iraq.[5] Bin Laden carefully framed his message in religious parlance that portrayed the United States as a crusader army that was directly attacking the *ummah* and supporting corrupt leaders in the heart of the Muslim world.[6] His rhetoric turned to action with the bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, the attack against the *USS Cole* in 2000, and the coordinated strikes against the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001.[7] These events propelled the United States and its allies into the Global War on Terror (GWOT), which ultimately led them into protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition to these conventional wars, the desire to eradicate the threat of global jihad has also largely defined U.S. foreign policy and domestic security initiatives since 2001. The United States and its allies have framed transnational terrorism as one of the first great struggles of the 21st century and therefore is a relevant field of study.

In combating al-Qaeda, the United States has focused a great amount of resources on depriving the group of support networks, financial resources, and safe havens. In addition to strikes directed at the organization's leadership, these initiatives have largely been effective in disrupting al-Qaeda's ability to centrally plan and control complex

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[4] Christopher M. Blanchard, *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology*, CRS Report No. RL32759 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2005): 2, http://fas.org/irp/crs/RL32759.pdf.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Blanchard, *Statements and Evolving Ideology*, 3.

[7] Ibid., 3–4.

attacks against Western targets.[8] One area on which the United States has focused less attention is discrediting the transnational jihadi ideological narrative. Despite the nearly complete dismantling of the central al-Qaeda leadership structure, its affiliate groups still operate with impunity throughout the Middle East and North Africa.[9] Although these groups are largely autonomous and receive little guidance or support from a central command, they still operate under the banner of the al-Qaeda brand and justify actions according to the teachings and proclamations of bin Laden and his successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri. For many radical groups, al-Qaeda's ideological message still resonates and motivates them to action despite having only loose ties with their parent organization.

The United States has been effective in limiting al-Qaeda's opportunity structures and its ability to mobilize resources, but has failed to significantly degrade its message framing processes. In social movement theory, the framing process is a key component, alongside resource mobilization and political opportunity for recruitment, sustainment, and the ability to pursue group objectives.[10] Al-Qaeda's enduring ability to frame its ideology so that it still strongly resonates with its affiliates, would-be recruits, and segments of broader Muslim society is key to the group's survival and the survival of the global jihadi philosophy.

Al-Qaeda's ability to ensure its belief system's long-term survival is predicated on winning the framing contest with rival ideological competitors. Whether the competitors are democratic governments, Islamic clerics, or rival jihadi networks, al-Qaeda must assert enough authority in the ideological realm to continue to maintain a support base or it may face eventual extinction. The events of the Arab Spring left al-Qaeda with its first significant challenge to maintaining relevance and ideological authority. The popular social movements in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia stunned the entire world, including the al-Qaeda leadership, who had no hand in forcing the removal of long-standing regimes in those countries. The popular outcry for democratic elections

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[8] Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in its Third Decade*.

[9] Ibid., viii.

[10] Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Process and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), 611, http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611.

further alienated al-Qaeda from the sentiments of the broader population and many analysts believed that this would effectively be the end of al-Qaeda and global jihadi ideology in general.[11]

The prediction that al-Qaeda and global jihad would perish with the political revolutions of the Arab Spring now appears to have been a gross miscalculation by academics and analysts alike. The power vacuum that materialized with the fall of several autocratic regimes and the ongoing violence in Syria and Iraq have created fertile ground for al-Qaeda and other newly formed jihadi groups to operate.[12] This thesis analyzes al-Qaeda's message framing before, during, and after the events of the Arab Spring to determine if it attempted to re-frame its ideological positions and if this had any bearing on the group's survival during this tumultuous period. This study may also have implications on the future prominence of the global jihadi organizations and the ideology that compels them to action.

C.   LITERATURE REVIEW

1.   Global Jihadi Ideology and the Rise of Al-Qaeda

There is a plethora of literature on the formation of global jihadi ideology and the history of the groups that subscribe to its principles. There are multiple interpretations of the meaning of jihad that are bitterly contested in the Muslim world today, but Islamic jurists and theological scholars have historically defined jihad as the mandatory collective struggle for Muslims to wage war against polytheists or those who threaten Islam.[13] Adherents to the global jihadi ideology have departed from this traditional framework and redefined jihad as an individual external struggle that all Muslims must undertake against enemies both foreign and domestic.[14] For the purposes of this thesis I will focus primarily on the core principles that make the global jihad unique from other radical Islamist groups. The Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb is often credited with inspiring the

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[11] Lahoud and al-ʿUbaydi, "Jihad Discourse," 6.

[12] Ibid., 18.

[13] Daniel W. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 164.

[14] Ibid., 269.

global jihadi movement in the modern era. His seminal work, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, is the basis for the ideological arguments global jihadi groups use to this day. Qutb emphasized the application of jihad in the pursuit of an Islamic society as it is defined in the Qur'an.[15] Qutb's sphere of influence in not limited only to radical jihadi groups. His writings have influenced many other popular Islamist movements and his reputation is held in high regard throughout many segments of the Muslim population. Because Qutb's teachings carry such great authority, al-Qaeda frequently invokes his works in order to bolster its own legitimacy and capitalize on the power of his reputation.[16] This is a message framing technique that global jihadi groups employ often.

Middle Eastern affairs analyst Christopher Blanchard argues that global jihadi ideology can be categorized into three core foundations.[17] The first foundation is "the Quran-Based Authority to Govern," which includes the creation of an Islamic State and the implementation of Sharia Law.[18] This principle foundation is also opposed to any system of governance that is "deemed contrary to Islamic faith."[19] The second foundation is "the liberation of the homelands."[20] This principle includes the belief that the far enemy must be defeated before Muslims are able to take control of their own domestic affairs and implement an Islamic State.[21] The far enemy is defined as governments or organizations outside of the Muslim world that support corrupt domestic regimes and oppress the *ummah* (Muslim community).[22] This belief is largely unique to the global jihadi ideology and, because they have made many successful attacks against foreign

[15] Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 149.

[16] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Framing Jihad: Intramovement Framing Contests and al-Qaeda's Struggle for Sacred Authority," in *Popular Intellectuals and Social Movements: Framing Protest in Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, ed. Michiel Baud and Rosanne Rutten (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 168.

[17] Blanchard, *Statements and Evolving Ideology*," 6.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Mary Habeck, "Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror*," John Hopkins University*, February 15, 2006, http://web.mit.edu/ssp/seminars/wed_archives06spring/habeck.html

states, these groups are of special interest to Western analysts and scholars. The final foundation in the global jihadi ideology is "the liberation of the human being."[23] This principle concerns the "contractual social relationship between Muslims and their rulers that would permit people to choose and criticize their leaders but also demand the Muslims resist and overthrow rulers who violate Islamic laws and principles."[24] This thesis will further explore the more nuanced aspects that make global jihadi ideology distinct from other belief systems, demonstrate how al-Qaeda employs these ideas through its message framing processes, and how it responded to framing and ideology arising in the Arab Spring.

There are extensive volumes of literature devoted to the formation of al-Qaeda and other global jihadi groups that have emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. The scope of this thesis does not necessitate a detailed examination of the rise of al-Qaeda and the methods, in which the organization were able to grow and carry out its attacks, but it is important to give a brief explanation of the group's history as it pertains to its ideology and framing practices. The group is a product of the *Mujahedeen* (protectors of the Muslim faith)[25] resistance that withstood the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s.[26] This resistance movement was framed as a defensive jihad against infidel forces and it attracted many young men from all over the Muslim world.[27] One of those fighters, Osama bin Laden, would carry the lessons he had learned in the Afghanistan campaign and expand jihadi operations to other areas of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Al-Qaeda was officially established in 1988, and since that time it has engaged in multiple campaigns against Western targets that it had identified as the far enemy.[28] Bin Laden began to focus much of his operations against U.S. targets due to America's

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 7.

[25] *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "mujahideen," accessed April 27, 2015, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1523091/mujahideen.

[26] James Defronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007), 336.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade*, viii.

participation in the Gulf war in the 1990s and its continued presence in Saudi Arabia.[29] Bin Laden viewed U.S. presence in the Muslim holy land as an affront to God, and believed America's influence over regional affairs was corrupting Muslim governments. In response, al-Qaeda made multiple attacks against U.S. embassies, and military targets, as well as the devastating coordinated assault on the World Trade Towers and Pentagon.[30]

2.   Framing Theory and Global Jihadi Ideology

This thesis is based largely on the presentation and analysis of public statements from prominent global jihadi organizations. It therefore places great importance on framing theory and collective action frames that fall within the broader study of social movements. Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow argue that research in social movement theory has traditionally revolved around political opportunity and resource mobilization.[31] Perhaps not uncoincidentally, the United States had sought to degrade these same areas in its global war on transnational terrorism.

Political opportunity and resource mobilization are undoubtedly important factors in the foundation and survival of global jihadi groups like al-Qaeda; much research and analysis has been focused on this phenomenon, but less attention has been paid to its ideological framing practices. Snow and Benford argue that researchers tend to "ignore or gloss over mobilizing beliefs and ideas" due to "their presumed ubiquity and constancy, which make them, in turn, relatively non-problematic and uninteresting factors in the movement equation."[32] Within the last decade, however, there has been a sharp increase in the study of "collective action frames and framing processes in relation to social

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[29] Defronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*, 336.

[30] Ibid., 338.

[31] Benford and Snow, "Framing Process," 611.

[32] Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol Mclurg Mueller (Binghamton, NY: Yale University, 1992), 135.

movements"[33] and many sociologists now believe that framing processes are "a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements."[34]

Like other social movements, global jihadi organizations utilize frames in order to simplify world events and give them significance in a way that mobilizes individuals and furthers the group's agenda.[35] Quintan Wiktorowicz has written extensively on the framing practices of global jihadi organizations, especially as they apply to ideological contests with competing groups. He argues that, by their nature, global jihadi organizations are relatively small movements and their radical ideology is not widely accepted by the broader population.[36] Because the global jihadi belief system is diametrically opposed to most other ideologies, they are essentially in a framing contest with numerous and very diverse competitors. Global jihadi groups face framing competition from non-violent Salafi scholars, domestic regimes, Western governments, and rival jihadi organizations. They are under siege from all directions and, being that they rely heavily on their ideology to mobilize support, it becomes imperative for them to take great care in their message framing processes.

Wiktorowicz argues that there are four main framing strategies that global jihadi groups utilize to assert their authority in the ideological realm: "vilification" and "discrediting" of their opponents and the "exaltation" and "credentialing" of their own leaders and ideals.[37] In the struggle for authority, these groups must endeavor to establish credibility if they are to have successful framing campaigns. If leaders are not perceived as honest, intellectual, and above reproach, the resonance of their message can be lost.[38] In the process of group framing it is also important to draw stark parallels between different movements. This is often accomplished by the vilification and conscious separation of one group from another. Wiktorowicz argues that "asserting a unique

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[33] Benford and Snow, "Framing Process," 611.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 614.

[36] Wiktorowicz, "Framing Jihad," 171.

[37] Ibid., 162.

[38] Ibid.

identify can help secure necessary resources, even if those come from small groups of supporters."[39] Negatively framing a rival group can also lead people to object to them without even being aware of their platform or core ideals.[40] Subsequent chapters in this thesis utilize these principles of framing theory to present and analyze public statements from prominent jihadi organizations.

3.   Message Framing before the Arab Spring

Although al-Qaeda has always been a clandestine organization, it has nevertheless been very forthcoming with public statements that explain the motivations and justifications for its actions. Prior to the Arab Spring, the message framing from the group's media branch was largely consistent with its ideological principles and rarely deviated from its global jihadi narrative.[41] Christopher Blanchard writes, "The Al-Qaeda terrorist network conducted a sophisticated public relations and media campaign…to elicit psychological reactions and communicate complex political messages to a global audience as well as to specific populations in the Islamic world, the United States, Europe, and Asia."[42] With Western and powers denying al-Qaeda financial resources, political opportunity, and safe haven, its message framing in the ideological war became increasingly important.

Wiktorowicz argues that al-Qaeda framed its messages to simultaneously discredit and vilify its opponents while at the same time exalting and credentialing its own organization and belief set.[43] Al-Qaeda leaders often found it difficult to discredit prominent religious scholars who represented the antithesis to its violent strategies. Many of the scholars that attacked jihadi groups' methods had doctoral degrees in Islamic studies, taught at the most prestigious religious universities, and held positions as advisors to political leaders. Finding it difficult to question their educational credentials, jihadi leaders instead pointed out that these scholars were too heavily influenced by

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[39] Ibid., 165.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Blanchard, "Al Qaeda," 1.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Wiktorowicz, "Framing Jihad," 162.

corrupt leaders to have their proclamations remain valid. They argued that, while their religious knowledge was unassailable, they had little practical conception of politics or current realities.[44] Vilifying and calling these scholars' credibility into question was a powerful framing tool for al-Qaeda and it resonated deeply with the groups followers. This thesis expands upon the framing strategies al-Qaeda employed from its inception in 1988 to the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2010. The presentation of its public statements demonstrates the ways in which al-Qaeda framed its messages to maintain relevance and support during the tumultuous years during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

4. Message Framing during the Arab Spring

By the time the events of the Arab Spring transpired, the central structure of al-Qaeda had "been pummeled, and its capabilities to mount large-scale attacks reduced."[45] In his book *Revolution and Revolutionary Movements*, James Defronzo writes, "Al-Qaeda, rather than being a tightly organized hierarchal organization, might more accurately be viewed as a transnational social movement attempting to spread and popularize its ideas to millions of Muslims who were expected to organize and act with little or no direct al-Qaeda assistance."[46] It was in this weakened state that al-Qaeda leadership attempted to come to terms with the unexpected revolutions of the Arab Spring.

In their article "Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring," Nelly Lahoud and Muhammad al'Ubaydi compiled an extensive collection of public statements from al-Qaeda leadership throughout the duration of the uprisings.[47] The initial reactions from al-Qaeda suggested that it was pleased with the events unfolding throughout the region and it released several statements congratulating the protestors on their courageous struggle to overthrow corrupt domestic leaders.[48] As the citizens of Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya began

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[44] Ibid., 169–70.

[45] Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade*, viii.

[46] Defronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*, 339.

[47] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihad Discourse," 8.

[48] Ibid., 16.

to clamor for democratic elections the message framing from al-Qaeda began to become more cautionary.[49]

Al-Qaeda had not been a part of the successful removal of long standing dictators and the validity of its whole ideology had now come into question. The popular will of the masses and not violent strikes against distant enemies had accomplished the task that al-Qaeda said could only be fulfilled by its committed jihadi vanguard.[50] The al-Qaeda organization had been gutted through the relentless pursuit of its leadership, resources, and opportunity structures; now its entire ideological framework had become questionable. Many news agencies and prominent political figures, including U.S. president Barack Obama, publicly stated that this would be the end of al-Qaeda and global jihadi ideology in general.[51] This was not to be however. The violence and political turmoil in MENA did not subside, and the countries that underwent democratic transition were faced with seemingly insurmountable economic and social problems. The instability in the region opened up new opportunities and battlegrounds for jihadi groups, and al-Qaeda emerged as one of the prominent voices in the post Arab Spring environment. This thesis further explores the public statements issued by al-Qaeda leadership, its regional affiliates, as well as the new jihadi groups that emerged after the revolutions.

5.   Global Jihadi Ideological Framing Today

Many new Jihadi groups have emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria. A number of these groups have identified themselves as transnational jihadist organizations such as Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia, Ansar al-Jihad in Egypt, and Jabhat al-Nursa and Islamic State (IS) in Syria.[52] While many public statements attributed to these groups have espoused their belief in striking the far enemy,

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., 17.

[51] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 19, 2011, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa.

[52] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse." 105

their actions to date, however, have focused primarily on sectarian violence and attacks against domestic and regional regimes. Many of these groups, including al-Qaeda, have urged their audiences to travel to Syria and engage in jihad against the Assad regime.[53] When and if the regional situation begins to normalize these groups may refocus their jihadi efforts against the far enemy. This thesis further analyzes current message framing trends from al-Qaeda in order to determine what type of targets these organizations are emphasizing.

D.   POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

One hypothesis of this thesis is that the events of the Arab Spring and its aftermath had minimal bearing on the ideological framing processes of al-Qaeda and other transnational jihadi groups. Al-Qaeda's public statements during the revolutions suggested that it was struggling to retain relevance with its audience and their desire for democratic transition. Despite being at odds with the majority of Muslims al-Qaeda largely maintained its position that global jihad is the only way to successfully free people of repressive regimes and establish an Islamic State. This thesis further analyzes the public statements of al-Qaeda's leadership to determine whether or not its framing practices changed considerably in response to the Arab Spring.

The second hypothesis of this thesis is that the current violence and instability resulting from the Arab Spring has shifted global jihadi focus to regional and domestic targets. The weak state governance and ongoing civil war in Syria has also created opportunities for new global jihadi groups to emerge. Because of the relative ease of moving foreign fighters into the Syrian conflict, al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other self-titled global jihadi groups are now placing greater emphasis on local operations. This thesis compiles and analyzes statements from global jihadi groups to determine if they are now prioritizing regional goals over operations against the far enemy.

The third hypothesis of this thesis is that al-Qaeda's position has been weakened by rival jihadi groups who have different objectives and strategies from AQ. Global jihadi organizations are not only engaged in an ideological framing contest, but are also

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[53] Ibid., 76.

vying for recruits and resources. With the steady rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Qaeda has arguably lost its place as the preeminent jihadi organization in the world and could potentially be overshadowed by the highly ambitious Islamic State. This thesis analyzes public statements from al-Qaeda Central (AQC) to better understand how it is framing its ideological contest and determine if there is a possibility for it to coexist with other groups despite their numerous differences.

E.   RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis is a collection and analysis of public statements from prominent al-Qaeda spokesmen from before, during, and after the events of the Arab Spring. I primarily focus on statements attributed to Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden, Abu Yahya al-Libi and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Because this thesis is focused on the Arab Spring's effect on global jihadi message framing, the statement analysis is mainly concentrated on the countries that were directly affected by these popular social movements. I discuss framing theory and the strategies that AQC uses to justify its ideological positions, garner support, recruit members, and challenge its competitors. Analyzing public statements from AQC in the context of the Arab Spring and its aftermath highlights subtle shifts in its framing processes during this tumultuous period. The Arab Spring has arguably been the most serious threat to the survival of global jihadi ideology, and this study attempts to explain how it survived and in many ways flourished in the wake of these revolutions.

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II.   PRE-ARAB SPRING AL-QAEDA MESSAGE FRAMING

From al-Qaeda's inception in 1988 to the dawn of the Arab Spring in December 2010, the worlds' most notorious global jihadi group went through great structural change.[54] In a relatively short period of time the group rose from its humble beginnings in the mountains of Afghanistan to the sophisticated global network that executed dozens of deadly attacks across the world. After al-Qaeda's most infamous attack on 9/11, the western world focused abundant resources and manpower to disrupt the group's safe havens, financial networks, and political support structures.[55] This Global War on Terror was successful in forcing al-Qaeda's core leadership into deep hiding, effectively nullifying the hierarchal command structure that had planned, financed, and executed major attacks in the beginning of the 21st century. Al-Qaeda's central command may have undergone significant structural change in the years following 9/11, but its ideological message framing practices and dissemination methods have remained largely consistent.[56]

This chapter analyzes the video messages, books, and proclamations that AQC's leading spokesmen and ideologues released publicly from 1988 to the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 in order to demonstrate the consistent message framing practices that the group employed. The essay discusses the framing practices of Abdullah Azzam, the first theoretician of global jihad, Osama bin Laden, AQC's charismatic spokesman, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQC's leading ideologue and strategist.[57] With only minor variations between these three global jihadists, the general themes discussed in their public messaging campaigns revolved around the primacy of transcontinental jihad, Muslim unity, grievances against the west and domestic regimes, as well as importance of military action and martyrdom operations.[58] This chapter also gives a brief

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[54] Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade*, 9.

[55] Ibid., 4.

[56] Blanchard, *Statements and Evolving Ideology*, 11.

[57] Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, edit., *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2009), 101.

[58] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse," 4–6.

background on Azzam, bin Laden, and Zawahiri as well as highlight examples of their messaging practices from 1988 to the end of 2010 to show the consistent nature of their message. Later chapters in my thesis discuss how AQC's message framing practices changed in light of the events of the Arab Spring as the group struggled to retain relevance.

The Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb is often credited as the father of global jihadi ideology, but it was Palestinian born Abdullah Azzam who truly developed the modern concept of global jihad, wrote extensively on the subject, and put it into action on the battle fields of Afghanistan.[59] Before Azzam traveled to Afghanistan to organize the mujahedeen in their struggle against the Soviets, he had spent his life in academic universities studying Islamic law. He received his doctorate from the highly regarded Al-Azhar University in Cairo and spent many years teaching in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan.[60] In addition to his academic background Azzam had some militant experience fighting against Israel between 1967–1969.[61] While teaching in Peshawar in the early 1980's Azzam moved across the border to join the Afghan and Arab mujahedeen that were engaged in a bloody struggle against the Red Army of the USSR.[62]

As the fighting in Afghanistan intensified, Azzam became disillusioned with the few number of Arab jihadists who had joined the battle and he wrote his two seminal works, *The Defense of Muslim Territories* and *Join the Caravan* in the mid 1980's in order to encourage more Muslims throughout MENA to join the struggle or send financial and humanitarian aid.[63] In his work *The Defense of Muslim Territories*, Azzam used his credentials as a religious scholar to argue that jihad was an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) that all Muslims worldwide must commit to.[64] He wrote, "Defensive jihad…consist of expelling unbelievers from our territory. This is an individual duty,

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[59] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 81.

[60] Ibid., 85.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., 92.

[63] Ibid., 97.

[64] Ibid.

indeed the most important of all individual duties."[65] Azzam argued that defensive jihad was necessary especially in cases when unbelievers enter Muslim lands and attempt to imprison Muslim people.[66] In *Defense of Muslim Territories* he acknowledged the ongoing struggle in Palestine but urged Arab fighters to make the fight in Afghanistan a priority due to the tenuous nature of the war, the relative ease of entering Afghanistan, and the fact that the mujahedeen were leading the efforts.[67] Azzam felt that Afghanistan was the most practical fight at that time and his books encouraged his readers to look outside the immediate region of the Arabian Peninsula and Levant and join their Muslim brothers in their fight against the communists.

In his work *Join the Caravan*, Azzam would further elaborate on his definition of jihad using religious arguments and historical examples. He argues that "Whoever dies without having fought (in a jihad), or having prepared his soul for this battle, dies on a branch of hypocrisy…a Muslim who is not performing jihad today is just like one who breaks the fast in Ramadan…or a rich person who withholds legal alms."[68] Azzam frequently quoted Quaranic texts and used the threat of eternal hellfire to encourage his readers to fulfill their God given duty. He writes, "Unless you march forth, He (God) will punish you with a severe punishment, and will replace you with another people, and you will not harm Him at all."[69] Azzam also appealed directly to young people stating: "since jihad is an individual duty, no permission is required from one's parents, just as such permission is unnecessary for those performing the dawn prayer or fasting during the month of Ramadan."[70] Like al-Qaeda ideologues that would follow him, Azzam argued that jihad is a lifelong duty and every Muslim must risk his life to fulfill the individual obligation of pushing unbelievers out of Muslim territories, wherever they may be.[71]

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[65] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 106.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., 116–117.

[69] Ibid., 113.

[70] Ibid., 121.

[71] Ibid.

Azzam's body of work and his ideological message framing would have a tremendous impact on both Osama bin Laden and to a lesser extent Ayman al-Zawahiri.[72]

Another theme that Azzam spoke of frequently in his written works and public statements was martyrdom. His ideological arguments for this type of sacrifice would have a resounding impact on the tactics al-Qaeda would later use in its attacks on western targets. Azzam argued that martyrdom was one of the greatest things a Muslim could achieve.[73] He quoted Quranic verses and hadith that promised great rewards for martyrdom such as the forgiveness of sin, a place in Paradise, seventy-two wives, and "intercession for seventy people of his household."[74] Azzam stated that a martyr is a courageous Muslim who dies in a righteous battle against unbelievers.[75] Azzam is credited with developing the modern cult of martyrdom in radical Sunni Islamist ideology; to many jihadists, this remains "the ultimate form of devotion to God."[76]

Another theme that Azzam frequently wrote about was the importance of a jihadi vanguard. In his work *Solid Base*, he argues that "every principle must be supported by a vanguard, which clears a path for itself toward society, at the price of vast efforts and heavy sacrifices…every dogma, even if its comes from the Lord of the worlds, will be stillborn if it does not find a vanguard that sacrifices itself and expends every effort in order to defend it."[77] The concept of an elite vanguard leading the way for the greater Muslim world would become an important ideological framing practice for AQC in the years after the Afghan war and continues to be a major theme in its public statements today.[78] Azzam's literary legacy is still felt in modern radical Islamist circles, and his tutelage and partnership with a young Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan where the two men established the Service Bureau (*Maktab al-Khadamat*) set the foundation and

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[72] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*., 101.

[73] Ibid., 119.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., 132.

[76] Ibid., 100.

[77] Ibid., 140.

[78] Ibid.

ideological framework for al-Qaeda.[79] Azzam religious credentials gave him more credibility than subsequent al-Qaeda ideologues and it is possible that al-Qaeda could have been a much more formidable organization had he not been killed by a car bomb in 1988.[80]

If Abdullah Azzam can be credited with laying the framework for modern global jihadist ideology, Osama bin Laden can be regarded as the individual who brought this esoteric ideological message to the masses and more devastatingly, acted upon it on a global scale.[81] Bin Laden, a Saudi national, did not have the religious credentials that made Azzam a respected ideologue in the radical Islamist world. He was the son a wealthy real estate developer and spent his formative years in living in Jeddah. In high school and later studying at King Abdul Aziz University he became interested in Islamic activism.[82] In his first forays into militancy he helped finance the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in its efforts to overthrow the secular regime of Hafez al-Assad in Syria.[83] Bin Laden took a more direct role in the early 1980s when he traveled to Afghanistan to work as a financier and logistician for the mujahedeen fighting the Soviet Army.[84] It was during this period that bin Laden met Azzam and they formed the Service Bureau (Maktab al-Khadamat), an organization that recruited and trained Arab jihadists in Afghanistan.[85] Bin Laden worked primarily as a financial broker between the mujahedeen and wealthy donors on the Arabian Peninsula while Azzam was the ideologue and group patriarch.[86]

In Afghanistan bin Laden also came into contact with Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri and together they drifted away from Azzam. By the late 1980s bin Laden and

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[79] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 18.

[80] Ibid., 101.

[81] "Osama bin Laden," *Biography.com*, accessed March 27, 2015, http://www.biography.com/people/osama-bin-laden-37172.

[82] Biography.com, "Osama bin Laden."

[83] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 15.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid., 18.

[86] Ibid.

al-Zawahiri had been forced into exile in Afghanistan after attempting to establish jihadist strongholds in Sudan and Yemen.[87] By this point bin Laden had identified the United States and to a lesser extent Israel as the prime enemies subjugating the Muslim people. Bin Laden argued that, since the 1983 intervention in the Lebanese civil war, the United States had been interfering in the Muslim world.[88] After the first Gulf War in Iraq bin Laden had hardened his opinion that the United States represented a crusader force in the heart of the Muslim holy land and efforts were needed to force them out.[89] From his base in Afghanistan bin Laden began planning strikes against this new far enemy and putting together his media campaign in order to gain additional financial support and recruits.

It is important to understand how the media space in the Arab world was going through rapid changes in the early to mid-1990s. This would have a profound effect on the ability for al-Qaeda to promulgate its messages and control its framing strategy. Before the 1990s the regimes in the Arabian Peninsula had been able to restrict the flow of information to a relatively high degree through state controlled newspapers, radio, and television, but in the 1990s several prominent Arabic language newspapers began to migrate from Beirut to London in order to escape harsh censorship or in some cases persecution for printing articles critical of ruling regimes.[90] The first gulf war was also a worldwide media event and many Muslims across MENA were looking for real-time and accurate television news.[91] By 1996, the Al-Jazeera News network had been established in Qatar and millions of Muslims were now able to consume relatively unbiased reporting and also had the opportunity to see interviews with controversial figures that were often critical of regional powers.[92] With the advancement of the Internet and its increasing prevalence in the 1990s, the Muslim world now had many outlets to receive information,

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[87] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 22.

[88] Ibid., 24.

[89] Ibid., 21.

[90] Ibid., 27.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

and for groups like al-Qaeda, along with other groups spanning the ideological spectrum, they now had the ability to promulgate their ideology on a massive stage.

For visual media, bin Laden realized that almost as important as the message itself was the aesthetics, language, and duration of the media product.[93] His typical videos were succinct, with simple backgrounds, narrated in unsophisticated language.[94] In this fashion he could ensure that the quick-cycling news media aired his short videos and that the simple messages reached a large audience with varying levels of education and religious training.[95] In al-Qaeda's early days it also attacked targets that "emphasize[d] the image" rather than dealing crippling blows the military units or vital economic infrastructure.[96] A gun attack at a Jewish synagogue would symbolize Palestine's fight against Israel, while a bombing at an American embassy would represent al-Qaeda attacking U.S. foreign policy.[97] The visuals of the attacks themselves were powerful messages and part of al-Qaeda's coordinated framing strategy. Al-Qaeda's overall military strategy would evolve over time to focus more heavily on economic and military victories against the U.S. armed forces in Iraq but in its infancy, al-Qaeda deliberately chose targets that would elicit emotion through powerful visuals.[98]

In al-Qaeda's message framing, bin Laden, with the heavy influence of Ayman al-Zawahiri took the foundations of global jihad that Abdullah Azzam had laid out and built upon them exponentially. Bin Laden especially expanded upon the idea of the importance of attacking the far enemy before focusing on corrupt domestic regimes. In a 1997 CNN interview, when asked about his main criticism of the Saudi government, bin Laden said, "Regarding the criticism of the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula, the first one is their subordination to the United States. So our main problem is the U.S.

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[93] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 28.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid., 29.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31.

government, while the Saudi regime is but a branch or an agent of the U.S."[99] Bin Laden went on to state that the American government were immune to words, only understand violence, and "our people in the Arabian Peninsula will send [the United States a] message with no words, because [they] do not understand them."[100]

In many of his public statements bin Laden would address the American public directly to explain the reasons for al-Qaeda's attacks against them and give prescriptive advice on how they can ensure their future security. In one such message to the America public bin Laden stated: "sensible people would never squander their security, wealth, and children for the sake of the liar in the White House…Your security is not in the hands of Kerry, or Bush, or al-Qaeda…it is in your hands, and any state that does not violate our security has automatically guaranteed its own."[101] Pursuing the United States would be the hallmark of bin Laden's framing practices for the duration of his tenure as al-Qaeda's lead spokesman. His successor Ayman al-Zawahiri would have a more complex messaging strategy that would focus on a broader number of topics and enemies.

Like his mentor Azzam, bin Laden spoke frequently about the need for an Islamic vanguard, and he positioned al-Qaeda as the group that would selflessly fight for the Muslim world. He stated: "We carry out the mission, and the rest of the *ummah* is thereby absolved."[102] Bin Laden described al-Qaeda as a pious group of dedicated Islamic warriors who had disavowed worldly possessions and family to take up the noble cause of Jihad.[103] Quintan Wiktorowicz argues that this form of self-exaltation and credentialing is a powerful framing practice used in many social movements.[104] Bin Laden intended to show the contrast between his noble vanguard and the morally corrupt governments of the United States and other domestic regimes. AQC under the leadership of bin Laden would continue to tout itself as the one true vanguard fighting for the

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[99] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 51.

[100] Ibid., 52.

[101] Ibid., 76–77.

[102] Ibid., 34.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Wiktorowicz, "Framing Jihad," 162.

freedom of the Muslim world, until the events of the Arab Spring called this assertion into greater question.

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, bin Laden began to release more public messages that compared historical events from the time of the rightly guided caliphs with current events. He would recount stories of Persian invasions of Muslim lands and compare this to the U.S.-led coalition waging war in the Arabian Peninsula.[105] It is difficult to gauge how much this messaging campaign influenced events, but from 2003–2006 thousands of foreign fighters and Iraqis joined al-Qaeda's affiliate organization in Iraq to fight against the invading forces and western backed government.[106] Bin Laden urged his audience to find courage in the examples of brave Muslims of the past who against insurmountable odds fought off superior forces. He would cite successful attacks against the U.S. embassies in East Africa, the bombing of the *USS Cole*, and 9/11 as examples of military victories that demonstrate the wests vulnerability and encouraged would be jihadists to follow these examples and join al-Qaeda in its struggle in Iraq.[107] Throughout bin Laden's life he would continue to publicly emphasize how the crusader armies of the west's presence in the Middle Ease was proof of history repeating itself and therefore it was incumbent upon all Muslims to heed God's word and fulfill their duty of defensive jihad.

Bin Laden also frequently warned of the dangers of governmental systems that were not based on God's law as well as the evils of nationalism.[108] Bin Laden firmly believed that democratic intuitions were an affront to God and that any Muslims who willingly participated in elections or sought office are unbelievers.[109] As Iraq was going through its first wave of free elections after the fall of Saddam Hussein, bin Laden released the following statement: "Parliaments are ignorant religion, so those who obey princes and *ulema* (who allow what God has forbidden, like entering legislative councils,

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[105] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 61.

[106] Gerges, *Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, 19.

[107] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 61.

[108] Ibid., 30.

[109] Ibid., 68.

and forbid what God has allowed, like jihad) commit the sin of making these men lords in place of God."[110] Bin Laden also warned against nationalist tendencies that separated Muslim countries into fragmented and warring entities. He argued that since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, powerful western states have sought to divide the Muslim people in order to better control the population, grow rich from the lands natural resources, and ensure the survival of the Israeli state.[111] For bin Laden and al-Qaeda the Muslim world would never be free from oppression until western imposed borders were erased, all unbelievers are pushed from Muslim lands, and the caliph is reinstated.[112]

Before Ayman al-Zawahiri became AQC's leader after the death of Osama bin Laden he was the groups principle ideologue and strategist. Today he is perhaps the most well know global jihadist but he came to that particular brand of Islamic radicalism relatively late in his life.[113] The Egyptian born al-Zawahiri was a diligent adherent of compatriot Sayyid Qutb, and from an early age he was heavily involved in political activism. He was imprisoned and allegedly tortured for his role in the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981.[114] After being released al-Zawahiri traveled to Afghanistan where he led the group the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. It was there that he united with Osama bin Laden.[115] Despite his participation in the war in Afghanistan al-Zawahiri's focus remained overthrowing the secular regime in Cairo.[116] His early writings and proclamations dealt primarily with this singular domestic issue and it was not until 1998 when al-Zawahiri merged his group with bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization that he shifted his views towards a global jihadi ideology.[117] His merge with al-Qaeda may have been just as pragmatically motivated, as it was ideological because al-

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[110] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 68.

[111] Ibid., 54.

[112] Ibid., 199.

[113] Ibid., 147.

[114] "Ayman al Zawahiri," *Biography.com*, accessed Mar 27, 2015, http://www.biography.com/people/ ayman-al-zawahiri-241182.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 147.

[117] Ibid., 158.

Zawahiri had been finding it difficult to secure funding for his organization.[118] Since that time he has written and spoken prolifically on the importance of global jihad and even today remains AQC's lead spokesman.

Ayman al-Zawahiri was not the charismatic icon that bin Laden was, but he has written several major works, such as *Knights under the Prophets Banner*, that are highly regarded and referenced frequently in radical Islamist circles.[119] His published works echo the earlier writings of Abdullah Azzam but expand considerably on the importance of striking the far enemy.[120] Al-Zawahiri furthered the idea that conflict with domestic regimes in the Muslim world was not possible while the United States still supported them militarily and financially and therefore strikes against the far enemy should take precedence.[121] Al-Zawahiri was careful to frame al-Qaeda's attacks against U.S. targets as specific acts of retaliation for perceived assaults against Islam.[122] For example, the U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa were in response to CIA arrests of prominent jihadi leaders while the suicide attack on the *USS Cole* was retaliation for U.S. airstrikes on jihadi training camps in Afghanistan.[123]

In his book *Knights Under the Prophets Banner*, al-Zawahiri spoke earnestly about the importance of brining the battle to the enemy rather than letting the United States and its allies dictate the terms of conflict.[124] Al-Zawahiri argued that striking the enemy at home would either make them abandon their interests in the Muslim world or draw them into direct conflict.[125] From his writings al-Zawahiri appears to prefer the outcome where the United States invades Muslim countries. He argues that any invasion by unbelievers "will turn the struggle into a clear cut jihad."[126] His writings indicate that

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[118] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 158.

[119] Biography.com, "Ayman al Zawahiri."

[120] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 159.

[121] Ibid., 159.

[122] Ibid., 160

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid., 199.

[125] Ibid., 202.

[126] Ibid.

al-Zawahiri values the unifying power that a foreign invasion could have on the Muslim world more than protecting innocent people from the devastation of war.

Ayman al-Zawahiri writes extensively about the importance of Muslim unity. Like bin Laden he consistently encouraged cooperation, or at the very least tolerance, between Shia and Sunni sects as well as cooperation between different ethnicities and nationalities. He understood the importance in strength in numbers and saw sectarian violence as a major inhibitor to achieving al-Qaeda's ultimate goal of repelling the invaders and reestablishing the caliphate.[127] In a private letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of the al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, al-Zawahiri urged his subordinate to put an end to the widespread sectarian violence. He asked in reference to the al-Zarqawi's attacks against the Shia: "is this inevitable? Can it be deferred until the jihadist movement's strength increases? And even if some operation can be qualified as self-defense, are they all necessary? Or have there been unjustified operation? Is it wise to open up a new front, in addition to those with the Americans and the government."[128] For al-Zawahiri the belief that al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) should not attack Shia communities was not only pragmatic but ideological as well. He asked al-Zarqawi: "And will [AQI] kill ordinary Shiites, when their ignorance ensures that they will be forgiven? What will we loose if we do not attack the Shiities?"[129] Despite his great misgivings al-Zawahiri continued to support the efforts of al-Zarqawi because his organization continued to find tremendous success against the United States from 2003–2006.[130] However, throughout his tenure as al-Qaeda's most prominent ideologue and leader, his public messaging has remained consistent in regards to the importance of Muslim unity.

Al-Zawahiri also writes frequently about the dangers of democracy. Like bin Laden he compares it to a religion where men control men, create their own laws, and contradicts God's divine guidance.[131] Al-Zawahiri frequently pointed to examples in

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127 Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 204.

128 Ibid., 169.

129 Ibid.

130 Gerges, *Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda*, 19.

131 Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 184.

history where Islamic groups attempted to incorporate themselves into democratic systems and failed. He argued that "The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria…wanted to use the ballot boxes in a bid to reach the presidential palace and ministries, but at the gates tanks were waiting, loaded with French ammunition pointing at those who had forgotten the rules of the battle between justice and falsehood."[132] He publicly vilified prominent religious leaders like Saudi cleric Sheikh Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz who urged Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan to vote in democratic elections.[133] He publicly framed these religious leaders as misguided, hypocritical, and pawns of corrupt domestic regimes.[134]

It can be argued that al-Zawahiri's prodigious and diverse output of messages, videos, interviews, and written works have been counter-productive to his framing strategy. He publicly criticized everything from France's ban on Islamic headscarves to non-Muslim NGOs conducting humanitarian disaster relief after an earthquake in Pakistan.[135] Bin Laden did not overwhelm his audience with information in the way that al-Zawahiri has typically done, and therefore received wider coverage when rare messages were released.[136] At the turn of the millennium al-Zawahiri's speeches received front-page coverage but the increasing volume of his messages, and the often-mundane subject matter made his talking points less relevant and news worthy.[137] This chapter has demonstrated that al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden, and Abdullah Azzam maintained a consistent message framing campaign since al-Qaeda's inception in 1988 to the dawn of the Arab Spring in 2011. Although there have been slight variations in individual styles of public messaging, the themes and language have been constant. Subsequent chapters will discuss AQC's sudden shift in framing practices due to the unforeseen events of the Arab Spring.

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[132] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 194.

[133] Ibid., 190.

[134] Ibid., 190.

[135] Ibid., 162.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid., 163.

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III.   A STRUGGLE FOR RELEVANCE: AL-QAEDA'S IDEOLOGICAL FRAMING DURING THE ARAB SPRING

In May 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama addressed the world regarding the tremendous events of the Arab Spring and how these popular revolutions would be the end of al-Qaeda's ideology: "By the time we found bin Laden, al Qaeda's agenda had come to be seen by the vast majority of the region as a dead end, and the people of the Middle East and North Africa had taken their future into their own hands."[138] The world watched with reserved optimism that the popular revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya would usher in a new era of stability and peace in a region fraught with decades of violence and oppression. When the majority of Muslims in these countries demanded democratic elections, many foreign policy analysts, academics, and world leaders believed that these states could provide the models for further democratization in the region. Moreover, many people echoed the sentiments of President Obama and believed these revolutions could provide a viable alternative to the radical methods of al-Qaeda and effectively end global jihadi ideology.

The events of the Arab Spring did present al-Qaeda with unprecedented challenges. The much-maligned dictators in several Muslim countries had been toppled by popular social movements and not the global jihadi vanguard. Western powers, or the far enemy, did not intervene to prevent this from happening and in the case of Libya, even aided the people's revolution against Gadhafi. Finally, the popular call for democratic elections further distanced the majority of Muslims from al-Qaeda's radical designs for an Islamic form of governance.

To al-Qaeda's leadership, the toppling of these Muslim regimes provided them an unexpected opportunity to mobilize the population and transform society into their ideal model, but their vision appeared to be at odds with the majority's will as viewed by the Arab Spring. Global jihadi ideology had only ever resonated with a small minority of Muslims and al-Qaeda faced a stern challenge in trying to redirect the momentum of

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[138] Obama, "Remarks by the President."

these social movements away from democratic transition.[139] This chapter analyzes the public statements from prominent al-Qaeda leaders during the events of the Arab Spring to demonstrate how they framed their ideological narrative and attempted and ultimately failed to sway their broad audience towards their vision. I limit the focus of my analysis to the Shuyukh al-Jihad (Sheikhs of Jihad) who are the prominent voices that shape the core leadership of the AL Qaeda organization and speak to a global audience.[140] This group included Osama bin Laden, Ayam al-Zawahiri, Atiyya al-Libi, and Abu Yahya al-Libi. I argue that, while their discourse during the Arab Spring failed to convince the majority of Muslims to abandon democratic transition, they did, however, successfully capitalize on other less ambitious opportunities to exploit and further their ideological agenda.[141]

By the time the Arab Spring swept across MENA in the winter of 2011, al-Qaeda was a highly decentralized organization with numerous autonomous affiliates acting independently from any core leadership base.[142] The decade long Global War on Terror waged by the United States and its allies had been effective in limiting opportunity structures, resources, and safe havens that al-Qaeda enjoyed for many years.[143] Affiliate groups were still active in various parts of the region, but operations were not being planned or organized by the surviving al-Qaeda leadership. They did still posses one critical instrument, however, their ideology, and the ability to disseminate it quickly and effectively to a global audience.[144] Within jihadi circles, the old guard of al-Qaeda still maintained tremendous influence due to the numerous high profile attacks that they had carried out against the far enemy. When longstanding dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya fell, these leaders seized the opportunity to appeal to the broader Muslim

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[139] Jacob Poushter, "Support for al Qaeda was Low before (and after) Osama bin Laden's Death," Pew Research Center, May 2, 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/02/support-for-al-qaeda-was-low-before-and-after-osama-bin-ladens-death/

[140] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse," 12.

[141] Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in its Third Decade*, viii.

[142] Ibid., 4.

[143] Ibid., viii.

[144] Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade*, viii.

community and urged them to capitalize on their victories and usher in a new Islamic golden age.

Although bin Laden would not live long enough to witness how the Arab Spring would play out in its entirety, he nevertheless observed the initial stages and welcomed it with cautious optimism. In his personal letters to associates, which were later released publicly, he stated, "the fall of the remaining tyrants in the region was inevitable," but al-Qaeda must capitalize on these events by "educating and warning Muslim people [about] half solutions."[145] Bin Laden was speaking directly about democratic elections and political Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Ennahda Party in Tunisia.[146] Bin Laden believed al-Qaeda could provide religious council and advise Muslim people on the merits and methods of creating an Islamic state now that the obstacle of corrupt domestic regimes had been removed.[147] With bin Laden's death, it became incumbent on the remaining leadership to bring this message to the people. The topic of democratic transition became the most troubling issue for al-Qaeda to reconcile. Its public statements were at times cautionary and in some cases highly critical and accusatory.

When just over half of all Tunisians and Egyptians, and nearly 62 percent of Libyans turned out for elections following the revolutions, al-Qaeda leaders were faced with a difficult situation.[148] Abu Yahya al-Libi criticized democracy as a "more spacious prison," while al-Zawahiri attempted to incorporate the democratic process into jihadi ideology by linking it to the first four rightly guided Caliphs. Al-Zawahiri argued "that it was through the 'consensus of the umm' (*ijma' al-umma*) that the Rightly-Guided Caliphs were appointed."[149] Despite his statements affirming that the Muslim people

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[145] Johan Kassel, "Bin Laden Supported the Arab Spring," *Financial Times*, May 3, 2012, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/a218eb16-9539-11e1-8faf-00144feab49a,Authorised=false.html?_i_location= http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Fa218eb16-9539-11e1-8faf-00144feab49a.html%3F siteedition%3Duk&siteedition=uk&_i_referer=#axzz3DzwsIHZn.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse," 18.

[148] Ibid., 17.

[149] Ibid., 19.

should be able to choose their own leaders, he still rejected the direct electoral process. In jihadi ideology, leaders should be elected by a small group of educated elites.[150] There are obvious problems with this framework; al-Zawahiri provided no coherent method on how this council should be formed or who in particular should be considered for membership.[151] Jihadi ideology is severely lacking in the nuanced practicalities required for implementing an Islamic State in the modern era.

As events unfolded during the Arab Spring it became clear to al-Qaeda's leaders that the majority of people desired democratic institutions. Their ideology was adverse to "the formation, of political parties, contesting elections and the establishment of democratic regimes…they deem[ed] such processes to be guided by positive law (i.e., man-made law) and in their minds, holding elections constitute[s] a violation of God's law.[152] In a message to the Egyptian people Ayman al-Zawahiri stated, "who should judge and rule, the people or the Creator of the people? If we concede to the enemies of Islam that rule is by the people, then we are defeated before we start the battle."[153] Al-Zawahiri went on to argue that that Egyptians must not let the far enemy manipulate these revolutions and turn the country away from an Islamic path.

Al-Zawahiri concluded his address by stating, "the Islamic movement must rise above its organizational and partisan disagreements in order to fulfill the main demands of the *ummah*, the most important of which is the application of Sharia, liberation from external control, and removal of injustice from the poor classes."[154] Al-Zawahiri has been consistent in his view that democracy, as conceived by westrn powers, is blasphemous and an obstacle preventing Muslims from building a society in God's model.[155] The high voter turnout in the post-revolutionary countries indicates that al-

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[150] Ibid., 20.

[151] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse," 20.

[152] Ibid., 17.

[153] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Why Did We Revolt Against Him?" *Global Terrorism Research Project*, February 29, 2012, http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10066/8489/ZAW20120229. pdf?sequence=4.

[154] Ibid., 6.

[155] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 184

Zawahiri's pleas were not well received by the majority of Muslims. He may, however, have felt vindicated with the spectacular failures of the political Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia, but his ideology was still radically out of step with mainstream society.

Democratic transition was not the only issue troubling al-Qaeda's leadership. Much of the organizations creditability was based on action and results. Al-Qaeda had always prided itself on backing up its rhetoric and ideology with devastating attacks against its stated enemies. In its pursuit of mobilizing future jihadists and garnering broader public support al-Qaeda needed to demonstrate that it was a legitimate force capable of achieving its strategic objectives of striking the far enemy until it loses resolve in supporting the near enemy.[156] Examples of successful results from its attacks are not quite as apparent. Al-Qaeda's multi decade terror campaign against the west has not weakened its enemy's resolve and it cannot claim that transnational jihad has ever effectively deposed a corrupt domestic regime either. More worrying for al-Qaeda was the fact that popular social revolutions had effectively accomplished this task in mere months.

Al-Qaeda leaders needed to be shown as active participants in these revolutions or they risked loosing relevance. Bin Laden was the first al-Qaeda leader to take some credit for the Arab Spring revolutions when he argued that the jihad against the west had "weakened the United States 'to such a degree that it enabled the Muslim people to reclaim confidence and courage' and therefore rebel against the 'agents of America.'"[157] Atiyya al-Libi echoed bin Laden's sentiments when he stated that al-Qaeda had sparked the revolutions by "spreading the sprit of challenge and sustaining power of rejecting and disdaining injustice."[158] Ayman al-Zawahiri not only claimed that al-Qaeda's operations had inspired the revolutions but he also argued that his organization had drained the United States economically and it was now unable and unwilling to continue to support its former allies in the region.[159] These public attempts claiming credit for the revolutions

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[156] Wiktorowicz, "Framing Jihad," 176.

[157] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse," 29.

[158] Ibid.,29.

[159] Al-Zawahiri, "Why Did We Revolt?" 2.

were wishful at best. Al-Qaeda's long held claim that transnational jihad is the 'only solution' to depose corrupt domestic regimes was verifiably disproven with the Arab Spring revolutions.[160] It could be argued, however, that al-Qaeda's ideological argument was bolstered by subsequent failures of peaceful democratic transition in Egypt and Libya. The ongoing democratic transition in Tunisia has promise but to date there is not an example of a completely successful social revolution stemming from the Arab Spring.

Al-Qaeda found very little success in its attempts to claim credit for the Arab Spring and even less success in convincing Muslims to abandon democratic transition. Despite this, the Arab Spring did present al-Qaeda with new opportunities to exploit. The Syrian Civil war became a very pertinent example of how apostate regimes and their western allies were a scourge on the Muslim world. It is estimated that nearly 200,000 people have died since hostilities began in Syria and hundreds of thousands more have been displaced.[161] Al-Qaeda capitalized on the bloodshed and chaos gripping the country and it released numerous messages calling for Muslims to join the jihad against the Assad regime. Al-Qaeda also forged an alliance with Jabhat al-Nusra, which is now arguably its most active and visible affiliate organization.[162] The heavy influx of foreign fighters and the ongoing violence have become fodder for al-Qaeda's propaganda campaign. Abu Yahya al-Libi issued the following statement to his global audience:

> Your demand is clear and specific, which is overthrowing the oppressive regime and offering the country and the people comfort away from it. And for you have bore the burden of what the near and the far [people] witnessed. And today, we see the schemes of the West –headed by America—sewing [*sic*] their threads against your revolution so they can answer the furthest of the people's demand by offering security to civilians under supervision of their [West] envoys and under the mandate

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[160] Ibid., 39.

[161] Nick Cumming-Bruce, "Death Toll in Syria Estimated at 191,000," *New York Times*, August 22, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/world/middleeast/un-raises-estimate-of-dead-in-syrian-conflict-to-191000.html?_r=0.

[162] "Jabhat al-Nursa," Australian National Security, last modified June 28, 2013, http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Jabhatal-Nusra.aspx.

of the criminal regime, which means solidifying its pillars and letting the way in front of it to catch its breathe again.[163]

Al-Qaeda began focusing much of its attention on not only encouraging Syrians to take up arms against Assad, but foreign fighters as well. The relative ease in which participants can cross the border in Turkey and Jordan has made Syria an accessible jihadi destination. It is estimated that there are now nearly 12,000 foreign fighters in Syria, albeit only a fraction of them aligned to an al-Qaeda affiliate.[164] Ayman Al Zawahiri has publicly called on the lions of Jordan, Turkey, and Syria to take up arms against the Assad regime and, "be one of the supportive rank in deterring their attack and in pushing back their domination, and seek to establish the Sharia of your Lord, and go onward dependent on Allah."[165] The Arab Spring may have damaged al-Qaeda's ideological narrative in many parts of MENA, but it has a pertinent new cause to champion with the Syrian civil war.

Al-Qaeda has never had broad appeal but its message does resonate with many Muslims, especially when they are living under despotic regimes that are supported by western powers. With the fall of the dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, however, the majority of Muslims seized the opportunity to shape new countries that were inclusive of their own varied beliefs and ideals. The instrument that the majority of people chose for this reshaping of society was democracy and the direct electoral process. Across the Muslim world, large numbers of secularists, political Islamists, and Salafists turned out in droves to elect leaders that would represent their interests. Al-Qaeda's leadership had failed to capitalize on the unprecedented opportunities that the Arab Spring brought. Their broad appeals to Muslims in these newly freed countries largely fell on deaf ears. This should not be surprising because the majority of people in the Muslim world do not seek the radical reshaping of society that al-Qaeda touts. Even conservative strands of

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[163] Abu Yahya Al-Libi, "Tragedies of Ash-Sham: Between the Crimes of the Nusayris and the Plots of the West." Haverford College Global Terrorism Project, June 12, 2012, http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10066/8499/AYL20120612.pdf?sequence=4

[164] Catherine Herridge, "US Official: Number of Foreign Fighters in Syria Spike," *Fox News*, July 25, 2014.

[165] Al-Zawahiri, "Why Did We Revolt?" 3.

Islamism accept that the democratic political process is the best way to incrementally bring society closer to the Koranic model.

This is not to say that global jihadi ideology is no longer salient to many people. Al-Qaeda still has numerous opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa that it can exploit. The ongoing civil war in Syria has become the new rallying cry for global jihad and the failure of smooth democratic transitions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya gives renewed credibility to the al-Qaeda's narrative that it is a flawed form of man made governance. Al-Qaeda can also point to the enduring and highly visible presence of the United States and other western powers in the Arab World as evidence that Muslims are still being oppressed and killed by crusader forces. Al-Qaeda's vanguard of global jihadists did not topple the corrupt Muslim regimes during the Arab Spring, nor could they mobilize the general population to embrace the radical implementation of Islamic governance. Despite this, their ideology is still relevant and will likely be so for the foreseeable future.

IV.   POST-ARAB SPRING AL-QAEDA MESSAGE FRAMING

Several scholarly journals and books, including Nelly Lahoud's "Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring" and Fawaz Gerge's *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, have been written about al-Qaeda Central's response to the Arab Spring and how its inconsistent message framing during that period jeopardized the group's long-term survival. With the possible exception of Tunisia, it became clear that peaceful democratic transitions in Egypt, Libya, and Syria would not materialize. This resuscitated the ailing global jihadi movement and provided it with new opportunities to advance its agenda.[166] The leaders of AQC have largely returned to their traditional message framing processes and are once again embroiled in a contest with rival groups to win adherents, financial support, and ideological superiority. This chapter analyzes the public statements of AQC in the wake of the Arab Spring to determine current trends in its message framing. This chapter will argue that AQC has begun to reemphasize its position that the far enemy is the biggest and most pressing threat to the Muslim world and that it is still calling for attacks against western targets, albeit on a smaller scale than previous operations. I will also argue that AQC has shifted some of its focus to regional jihadi campaigns in order to capitalize on the ongoing conflict in Syria, which has resonated deeply with jihadists around the world. This chapter will also argue that the new global jihadi groups that have emerged in places such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and the Indian sub-continent have echoed the sentiments of al-Qaeda in its calls for attacks against the far enemy. The global jihadi movement may not have the same prominence it once did but its ideology and message framing live on and continues to threaten the security of western states as well as local regimes.

AQC's message framing during the events of the Arab Spring seemed contradictory to the desires of the vast majority of the population in MENA. AQC frequently urged its audience to abandon the democratic transition process and instead work towards a unified Muslim community governed by sharia law.[167] Al-Qaeda's

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[166] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse," 18.

[167] Ibid., 17.

ability to ensure the long-term survival of its belief system is predicated largely on winning the framing contest with rival ideological competitors. Whether the competitors are democratic governments, Islamic clerics, rival jihadi networks, or the Muslim community in general, al-Qaeda must assert enough authority in the ideological realm to continue to maintain a support base or it may face eventual extinction. AQC has always been cognizant of carefully managing its ideological narrative and keeping its message framing consistent. The events of the Arab Spring forced AQC leadership to rapidly respond to the fluid and ever changing circumstances of the revolutions and their message framing was often confused, contradictory, and antagonistic toward their target audience.[168] Al-Qaeda as an organization had been decimated by the GWOT and in the wake of the Arab Spring it appeared that its ideological narrative was also in danger of falling into obscurity.

The prediction that al-Qaeda and global jihad would perish with the political revolutions of the Arab Spring now appear to have been a gross miscalculation by academics and analysts alike. The power vacuum that materialized with the fall of several autocratic regimes and the ongoing violence in Syria and Iraq have created fertile ground for al-Qaeda and other newly formed jihadi groups to operate.[169] As turmoil persists in MENA, al-Qaeda has returned to its core framing practices of the past. In the struggle for authority, these groups must endeavor to establish credibility if they are to have successful framing campaigns.[170] If leaders are not perceived as honest, intellectual, and above reproach the resonance of their message can be lost.[171] In the process of group framing it is also important to draw stark parallels between different movements. This is often accomplished by the vilification and conscious separation of one group from another. Negatively framing a rival group can also lead people to object to them without even being aware of their platform or core ideals.[172] During the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda's

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[168] Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, "Jihadi Discourse," 18

[169] Ibid., 18

[170] Wiktorowicz, "Framing Jihad," 162.

[171] Ibid.

[172] Ibid.

leadership departed from these effective framing strategies and in some cases began vilifying the very people they claimed to represent. Their own credibility was also called into question because these revolutions had come about through popular social movements against the near enemy and not the global jihad. This chapter will demonstrate that AQC has returned to these core-framing strategies in the wake of the Arab Spring.

As the current chief of AQC, Ayman al-Zawahiri's public statements are arguably the most important examples of the current trends in global jihadi message framing practices. He has returned to the core framing strategies that al-Qaeda has used in the past, including the call for attacks against the far enemy. In a public message released in September, 2013 al-Zawahiri stated, "We should bleed America economically by provoking it to continue in its massive expenditure on its security."[173] Knowing the limits of AQC and his affiliate organizations, al-Zawahiri calls for small attacks against the United States and its allies that will force them to expend great amounts of resources and time on bolstering their security procedures. His pragmatic messages do not call for grandiose displays of power like those seen on 9/11, rather he calls for attacks similar to the Boston bombings. Al-Zawahiri stated, "The Boston incident confirms to the Americans…that they are not facing individuals, organizations or groups, but they are facing an uprising *Ummah* (community), that rose in jihad to defend its soul, dignity and capabilities…What the American regime refuses to admit is that al-Qaeda was a message before it was an organization."[174] While he still emphasizes the far enemy, the strategy he is promoting is akin to a leaderless global jihad where lone individuals carry out small attacks on western targets to gradually wear them down economically and defeat their resolve to intervene in the affairs of the Muslim world.

Ayman al-Zawahiri's message framing in the wake of the Arab Spring has also emphasized the need for broad cooperation of all Muslims. His messages stand in stark contrast to the rhetoric and actions of ISIS who have engaged in a broad sectarian

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[173] Michael Pizzi, "Al-Qaeda Leader Calls for Attacks to 'Bleed' US Economically," *Aljazeera America*, September 13, 2013, http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/13/al-qaida-leader-callsforeconomicattacksonus.html.

[174] Ibid.

campaign against non-Sunnis. Al-Zawahiri has repeatedly urged Muslims of all nationalities, denominations, and ethnic backgrounds to set aside their differences and come together in a united jihad. From a strategic point of view, unifying the numerous jihadi groups throughout MENA could provide a substantial force that would potentially be capable of overthrowing governments and seizing large land areas. Al-Zawahiri is also cautious of the negative repercussions and press that come from sectarian violence. The vicious attacks against the Shiites in Iraq at the hands of al-Qaeda in Iraq galvanized broad support against the group and led to its eventual downfall. Al-Zawahiri is also conscious of the backlash ISIS has felt due to its sectarian violence and treatment of western captives. The actions of ISIS have galvanized broad international cooperation that seeks to contain and destroy the group.

In a recorded video message from April 2014 al-Zawahiri urges Muslims in Syria and Iraq to come together in order to overthrow the al-Assad regime. He stated: "Unity is (the jihadis') fortress against the flood of the conspiracies plotted against them. It is not reasonable that the Shi'ites unite and the Sunnis fight against one another. So everyone should prioritize the interest of Islam and the *Ummah* over his organizational or partisans interest."[175] Al-Zawahiri's statement is a counter-narrative to that of ISIS and several other jihadi groups that are not only fighting the al-Assad regime but each other. AQC is adamant that infighting is counterproductive to its cause and only furthers the goals of corrupt domestic regimes and the far enemy. The sectarian violence is one of the primary reason the AQC has distanced itself from the Islamic State.[176]

It is not difficult to find public statements by al-Zawahiri that contradicts his message of unity. In the same video where he pleads for broad cooperation between Sunnis and Shia he calls for Muslims to take up arms against Hezbollah.[177] When asked what should be done about the Lebanese-based Islamist armed group al-Zawahiri replied: "In my opinion, and Allah knows better, the so-called Hezbollah is an aggressor enemy

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[175] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Advises Kidnapping Westerns for Prisoner Exchanges," *Global Terrorism Research Project*, May 29, 2014, http://gtrp.haverford.edu/aqsi/aqsi-statement/801.

[176] "Al-Qaeda Disavows ISIS Militants in Syria," *BBC News Middle East*, February 3, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26016318.

[177] Al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Advises Kidnapping."

against the souls and honor of the Muslims, and their sanctities, and it is an ally to a regime that is among the most criminal regimes. The aggressor enemy must be deterred by any legitimate means."[178] For al-Zawahiri, the actions and politics of certain select groups are too abhorrent to put aside differences and create a unified front. Despite occasional instances where al-Zawahiri calls for violence against competing jihadi groups, AQC's broader narrative in the wake of the Arab Spring is one of unity and peace between all Muslims.

Another theme that has pervaded in AQC's entire message framing campaign after the Arab Spring is the United State's complicity in local government repression and the killing of innocent Muslims. This narrative should not be surprising since the organization was founded on the principle that the far enemy is ultimately responsible for the subjugation and murder of the *Ummah* but it is important to note that AQC still views the west as the primary enemy in the global jihad. Al-Zawahiri continually points out the hypocritical nature of Washington's statements about the importance of democracy and what they actually desire in the Middle East. He has repeatedly pointed to examples in Egypt and Palestine where the United States has either actively thwarted democratically elected governments or quietly acquiesced as they are deposed by internal elements.[179]

Al-Zawahiri also frequently discusses the United State's treatment of Muslim detainees and how this contradicts the government's public statements supporting human rights. In an interview conducted in April, 2014 al-Zawahiri was asked about the mistreatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and Washington's desire for democracy in the Middle East. He stated:

> Agreements about prisoners, preventing torture, and human rights—all these agreements—the West wrote them for itself, to be applied on the Westerners in their wars among one another. However, they deny them and abrogate them when they fight the Muslims, just like democracy, which they consider a doctrine and a practice specific to them, and no one else should enjoy of its features other than them, and no one else should

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[178] Al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Advises Kidnapping."

[179] Ibid.

enjoy its features other than them. Algeria, Egypt and Gaza are witness to that.[180]

The current ideological framing practices of AQC are heavily centered on the actions of the far enemy. This has been central to the organization since its inception and capitalizes on strong dislike of U.S. foreign policy in MENA. While many jihadi groups publicly admonish the United States and even call for attacks against it, AQC is unique in that it focuses so much of its rhetoric against the far enemy even in light of all regional turmoil, which perhaps is of more pressing concern for the Muslim people. As discussed above, al-Zawahiri is still calling for strikes against the far enemy and has even advised his audience in a recent interview to "capture Westerners…especially the Americans as much as they can, to exchange them for their captives."[181] It is important to note that despite the high levels anti-American rhetoric, AQC is not currently focusing solely on striking the far enemy. This may be partly due to the fact the central organization is unable to organize and mount a large scale attacks or perhaps the leadership is attempting to capitalize on the popularity of more regionally focused jihadi movements in Syria and Iraq.

The continuing violence in Syria has been another major theme in all of AQC's messaging in the post Arab Spring environment. The topic of the far enemy is still a major talking point but al-Zawahiri has recognized the tremendous opportunity to recruit foreign fighters in the popular jihad against the al-Assad regime. Recent estimates place the number of foreign fighters in Syria at around 16,000.[182] Syria presents a relatively easy destination for would-be jihadists to travel to and the plethora of established militant organizations make assimilation into the jihad a simple matter in comparison to planning elaborate attacks against the far enemy for example. AQC must also realize that if it is to compete with rival jihadi groups it must establish a strong presence in this conflict in order to be able to take credit should the regime fall.

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[180] Al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Advises Kidnapping."

[181] Ibid.

[182] Greg Miller, "Airstrikes Against Islamic State do not Seen to Have Affected Flow of Fighters to Syria," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/airstrikes-against-the-islamic-state-have-not-affected-flow-of-foreign-fighters-to-syria/2014/10/30/aa1f124a-603e-11e4-91f7-5d89b5e8c251_story.html.

AQC's Syrian affiliate the al-Nusra Front is currently one of the largest jihadi groups engaged in the battle against the al-Assad regime. Al-Zawahiri and other prominent al-Qaeda ideologues have increasingly devoted their energies to encouraging Muslims to join this organization. In a statement released in September 2012 al-Zawahiri urged Muslims to support "the mujahideen and doing the call to arms to them wherever they are, especially in Iraq and Syria. By supporting the mujahideen, the strength of the jihadi *Ummah* increases and the *Ummah* will learn the lost obligation from which its enemies had driven it away."[183] Statements like this are representative of AQC's adoption of focusing on regional conflicts since the events of the Arab Spring. The turmoil that has pervaded in the region since the popular revolutions has opened up a new battle space for the jihad, and these campaigns, unlike those directed at strong western targets, have the potential to be won.

Before his death, AQC ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi echoed al-Zawahiri's sentiments for the call to Jihad in Syria. In a recorded message from June 2012, he stated:

> From here we call upon our Muslim brothers and our mujahedeen brothers in Iraq, Jordan and Turkey to rise to help their brothers and to sacrifice themselves for them in order to stop the bloodshed of the weak, to preserve the honor of the free women, and to sacrifice everything that is precious and dear for that in terms of money and lives, and to consider every sacrifice to be cheap in return for defending them.[184]

With no end in sight to the civil war in Syria it is likely AQC will continue to urge its audience to join the jihad in the Levant. The popularity and relative ease of joining the battle makes it an enticing proposition for jihadists. Should the situation in Syria ever be resolved, or if the different factions come to an immovable stalemate it will be important to determine whether AQC shifts the emphasis of its messaging back to the far enemy. While it is true al-Zawahiri is still championing the battle against the United States and its allies, he clearly believes that the fight in Syria is of equal if not greater importance at the moment.

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[183] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Speaks on the 12th Anniversary of 9/11, Calls for Attack on U.S.," *Global Terrorism Research Project*, September 11, 2014, http://gtrp.haverford.edu/aqsi/aqsi-statement/821.

[184] Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Libi Speaks on the Plight of Syrians, Urges Fighters to Assist Them," *Global Terrorism Research Project*, June 12, 2012, http://gtrp.haverford.edu/aqsi/aqsi-statement/663.

In many of its public messages after the Arab Spring, AQC has stressed the importance of properly applying Sharia in the jihadi movement. These messages appear to be an attempt to curb unnecessarily violent behavior by jihadists that can turn public sentiment against the movement. Al-Zawahiri devotes large amounts of time in his public proclamations informing his audience that indiscriminate violence, the killing of innocent people, and any other behavior that falls outside divine law is forbidden. In a public statement released in April 2014 al-Zawahiri stated; "Jihad is like any other human activity in that errors occur in it…Do not imagine that it could be said that whoever incites for jihad is also the commander and thus he bears responsibility for the mistakes of the mujahideen in violation of Shariah."[185] Al-Zawahiri frequently implores those engaged in the jihad to act responsibly and in accordance with Sharia law. Public perception is key to gaining financial aid, recruits, and broader support in the Muslim world. If the jihadi movement is seen as a morally corrupt group of criminals that kill innocent people, then its religious credibility and virtue can be called into question.

al-Zawahiri also frequently discusses the importance of applying Sharia when planning martyrdom operations. In a taped interview in 2014, he stated:

> Martyrdom-seeking operations are like any other method that can be misused…We must be concerned for the sanctities and the blood that the Shariah made inviolable, in addition to the duty of determining the advantages and disadvantages when planning such operations, so that the media of the enemies does not exploit them to make the Ummah adverse to the mujahideen. This deviation must be resisted, by promoting virtue and prohibiting vice, and forming a public opinion between the Muslims and the mujahideen that denounces these deviations. If these errors took place then it is required to denounce them, and whoever did them must apologize and face the Shariah consequences.[186]

In the framing contest with competing Jihadi groups, al-Zawahiri is attempting to set AQC apart as the virtuous and rightly guided organization. As stated above, the most effective framing strategies involve the "exaltation" and "credentialing" of ones own

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[185] Al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Advises Kidnapping."

[186] Ibid.

group and the "vilification" and "discrediting" of ones opponent.[187] AQC consciously separated its ties with ISIS in February of 2014 because it viewed the group as detrimental to its cause.[188] The execution of innocent Muslim civilians and high levels of sectarian violence fell outside the parameters of AQC's interpretation of Sharia. It can also be argued that AQC decided to break ties due to ISIS announcing that it had incorporated al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate al-Nusra Front into its own organization without consulting al-Zawahiri beforehand.[189]

Regardless of the rationale, the AQC leadership has determined that it cannot be affiliated with a group that acts on its own volition and commits acts that do not fall within Sharia law. Although taking this moral high ground may give AQC an edge in the ideological battleground, it runs the very real risk of losing credibility if its affiliated groups do not behave according to its guidance. If al-Nusra front in Syria or AQAP in Yemen commit a violent act that contradicts al-Zawahiri's public decrees it is possible that AQC will be viewed as a weak organization that does not have any real control over its affiliate groups. AQC is no longer able to forcibly keep its offshoots in line with its policies and must rely on these groups to willingly acquiesce to their parent organization. Should a group not comply with AQC's demands the only recourse al-Zawahiri has is to withdraw support and deny them the al-Qaeda brand.

The final major topic that AQC has been discussing in its recent public messaging is the need to establish new al-Qaeda affiliates throughout the region. On September 3, 2014 Ayaman al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).[190] Al-Zawahiri claimed that AQC was able to broker an alliance between disparate groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Baluchistan that will actively target government agents aligned against the *ummah*.[191] It may seem

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[187] Wiktorowicz, "Framing Jihad," 162.

[188] BBC News Middle East, "Al-Qaeda Disavows ISIS Militants in Syria."

[189] Ibid.

[190] Jordan Olmstead, "The Real Reason al-Qaeda is Establishing an India Branch," *The Diplomat*, September 23, 2014, http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/the-real-reason-al-qaeda-is-establishing-an-india-branch/.

[191] Ibid.

counterintuitive to seek expansion of the al-Qaeda organization considering the current debilitated state of the central command but this announcement must be understood through the current context of the jihadi movement. ISIS has surpassed al-Qaeda in terms of number of recruits, popularity, and media exposure. AQC is a peripheral organization and is no longer the beneficiary of sizable financial donations and recruits.

Taking this into account it is not surprising that al-Zawahiri is seeking to demonstrate that al-Qaeda is still a valid global brand and the AQC is still capable of brokering high-level alliances. This also paints ISIS as an organization that is regionally focused and not capable of operating on an international stage. Many analysts have viewed the establishment of AQIS as a desperate maneuver to stay relevant in light of the rapid ascendency of ISIS.[192] A second explanation analysts have offered is that AQC is attempting to dissuade the Pakistani government from cracking down on various jihadist groups in the region.[193] Pakistan has become one of the last safe havens for AQC but at any point the Pakistani government could step up its anti-terror campaign against the group. A display of unity between multiple regional jihadi groups could be a strong deterrent against increased attacks against the jihadists. Whether AQIS becomes a dangerous global actor or simply an administrative alignment of numerous groups with competing agendas is not yet known. AQIS claimed responsibility for the attempted highjacking of a Pakistani Navy Frigate in September 2014 but have not yet successfully carried out any major attacks against regional governments or western states.[194]

Through the analysis of AQC's public statements since the events of the Arab Spring, this chapter has demonstrated that al-Qaeda's central leadership has made subtle changes to their ideological messaging. AQC is primarily focused on encouraging 'lone wolf' attacks against the far enemy, unifying Muslim people, applying sharia in the global jihad, recruiting foreign fighters in Syria, and establishing new affiliates in the

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[192] Olmstead, "Real Reason."

[193] Ibid.

[194] Andrew Hart, "New Al Qaeda Branch Attacks Wrong Ship," *Huffington Post*, September 13, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/12/alqaeda-india-attacks-ship_n_5814418.html.

region. Although al-Zawahiri routinely discusses a multitude of other issues it is the above-mentioned topics that currently pervade in his public announcements.

Arguably AQC no longer has the strength or popularity to significantly persuade its audience to adhere to its ideological narrative. New groups such as ISIS have eclipsed AQC on the world stage and al-Qaeda's affiliate organizations have little incentive other than retaining the al-Qaeda brand to remain loyal to the central organization. With that said, AQC is still operating, attempting to establish new affiliates, encouraging small scale attacks against the far enemy, and broadcasting its violent ideology to a broad audience. Time will tell if the organization can recover and reach the strength it held in the pre-9-11 world, but it remains vitally important to international security to monitor AQC's public statements and track shifts in its ideological narrative.

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V.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

During its history the al-Qaeda organization has gone through tremendous structural change. From its fledgling beginning in the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan War to its meteoric rise to the most powerful global jihadi group in the world, al-Qaeda's influence and reach has gone through many ups and downs. The organization has been incredibly adaptive to the ever-changing strategic environment and considering that most terrorist organization have a maximum life span of approximately fourteen years, al-Qaeda has proven its resilience as it closes out its third decade of existence.[195] Despite its longevity, the modern incarnation of AQC is not the formidable terrorist group that was once able to finance and plan complex attacks against western targets. Today, AQC is the largely ceremonial mouthpiece for a disparate collection of affiliate organizations scattered around the Middle East and parts of North and West Africa.[196] While the support structures, political opportunities, and the ability to mobilize resources have largely dissipated for AQC, its ideology and ability to disseminate its message is still largely intact.

The importance of maintaining a relevant ideology and consistent message framing practices cannot be overstated in the case of AQC. FBI Director Robert Muller argues that AQC's command structure, resources, and safe havens have been decimated since the beginning of the United States' anti-terror campaign.[197] Thousands of al-Qaeda operatives have been killed and the central leadership has been pushed into deep hiding where they are unable to coordinate and finance complex attacks.[198] In today's environment, AQC's ideology and ability to promulgate its message is arguably its most important weapon. Financial constraints and the inability to plan future jihadist

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[195] Bryan C. Price, "Leadership Decapitation and the End of Terrorist Groups." Policy Brief, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, May 2012.

[196] Bruce Hoffman et al., "Is al-Qaeda Central Still Relevant?" *The Washington Institute of Near East Policy*, September 10, 2012, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-al-qaeda-central-still-relevant.

[197] Kevin Johnson, "Weakened al-Qaeda is Still a Threat," *USA Today*, Accessed on May 20, 2015, http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/weakened-al-qaeda-threat/story?id=8525410&singlePage=true

[198] Ibid.

operations have little bearing on AQC's influence or its ability to encourage affiliate organizations and homegrown terrorists.[199] This thesis has argued that AQC has acknowledged its reduced ability to mount complex assaults and has instead looked to encourage "lone wolf" attacks that require no central leadership, financing, or training.[200] Broadly speaking, lone individuals and independent al-Qaeda affiliates no longer rely on their parent organization for anything other than the al-Qaeda brand and ideological messaging. AQC may still view itself as a powerful organization capable of brokering alliances but there is scarce evidence that the groups core leadership holds the same influence that it once did under the leadership of Osama bin Laden.[201]

The first hypothesis posed in this thesis was that the events of the Arab Spring had minimal bearing on the ideological framing practices of al-Qaeda. The data compiled in this thesis demonstrates that his assertion is false. In its infancy AQC largely maintained consistent framing practices but as the groups positioned weakened it frequently adapted its message when there where shifts in the strategic environment. This trend is especially apparent during the events of the Arab Spring when AQC ideologues struggled to fit their ideology into the rapidly shifting political setting. In general, AQC has remained true to its founding principles but routinely exploit new openings in the political environment when it appears beneficial to its goals and ultimate survival. AQC was severely weakened after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 but it recovered much of its stature after establishing a powerful al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq. Without exerting a great amount of central control over AQI, bin Laden used his stature as the worlds leading jihadist to encourage thousands of Iraqi and foreign fighters to join the AQ affiliate in Iraq and violently oppose the U.S. occupation and democratic transition.[202] Prioritizing attacks against U.S.-backed regional governments and military forces did not fit the traditional al-Qaeda model of defeating the far enemy first, but AQC realized that the chaos consuming Iraq after the U.S. invasion was a new opportunity to

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[199] Ibid.

[200] Pizzi, "Al-Qaeda Leader Calls."

[201] "Just What is the Current State of al-Qaeda Today?" *Public Radio International*, January 14, 2014, http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-01-14/just-what-current-state-al-qaeda-today.

[202] Gerges, *Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, 19.

exploit. For many years throughout the Iraq War AQC adapted its framing practices to emphasize the importance of expelling crusader forces from Muslim lands and urging the *ummah* to abandon the call for democratic transition.[203] AQC proved that even from a structurally weakened position it could maintain its relevance by channeling the energies of radical Islamists into its strategic mission.

As discussed previously in this thesis, AQC also attempted to adapt its framing strategy when the Arab Spring uprisings began in 2011 but the public messages seemed to be out of step with the desires of millions of Muslims clamoring for democratic elections. AQC began vilifying the majority of citizens in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen who marched to the polls in large numbers to usher in a new era of popularly elected representation. The autocratic rulers that AQC detested had been removed but not by its organizations hand, and the *ummah* that it professed to represent did not appear to have any interest in establishing an Islamic state. Furthermore, AQC failed to provide any coherent model of how such a transition should take place. Al-Qaeda's framing strategy had always been clear on the methods for removing corrupt dictators but there was a glaring paucity of practical plans for constructing a completely new form of government. The early stages of the Arab Spring, when many Muslims had a genuine belief that change was possible, exposed the frailty in al-Qaeda's ideology more than any other period in the group's history. Had the revolutions that spread across MENA in the beginning of 2011 led to lasting democratic transition and improved quality of life, it is possible that AQC's ideology could have disappeared into the annals of history, but this scenario never transpired. With the possible exception of Tunisia, the revolutions did not lead to peaceful democratic elections, and in the case of Syria, the uprisings have spurred a violent civil war that has opened fertile new ground for jihadist groups.

The second hypothesis posed in this thesis was that the current violence and instability resulting from the events of the Arab Spring has shifted global jihadi focus to regional and domestic targets. The data compiled in this thesis supports this assertion. Even before the violent fall out from the Arab Spring, AQC routinely focused its rhetoric

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[203] Ibid., 30.

towards regional targets like the democratically elected governments in post-war Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to AQC's ideological framing shifts that focus on the near enemy, its affiliate organizations are almost all exclusively pursuing domestic targets as well. Today AQC is once again adapting its framing strategy to exploit the turmoil gripping Syria and Iraq. The popularity of the civil war in this region has attracted thousands of foreign fighters, and the ease of entry into the Syrian borders, proliferation of weapons, and absence of strong governance make it a relatively open destination for radical Islamists.[204] Ayman al-Zawahiri has made repeated public calls for Muslims to join al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the al-Nusra Front, and this group remains one of the largest and most active organizations operating in Syria today.[205]

The final hypothesis posed in this thesis was that rival jihadi groups with conflicting objectives and strategies have weakened AQC. The data compiled in this thesis supports this assertion. Even before the rise of ISIS, AQC's position as the world's preeminent jihadist organization was tenuous. Al-Qaeda's central leadership had been isolated and marginalized and they had little control over their numerous affiliate organizations. AQC has been further weakened by its ideological and physical struggle with ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are also losing potential recruits and funding due to the relative popularity of ISIS. ISIS has overshadowed AQC and the al-Nusra Front in the past year but AQC continue to tailor its public messaging to compete with its rival group. Al-Zawahiri has repeatedly called for an end to the widespread sectarian violence being perpetrated by ISIS and has urged unity in the fight against the apostate regimes and their western backers.[206] The al-Nusra front has echoed its parent organization's sentiments and has publicly urged cooperation between all Muslims. It claims to support a gradual approach to the establishment of an Islamic State and are providing a powerful antithesis to the uncompromising and violent methods of

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[204] Herridge, "Number of Foreign Fighters."

[205] Al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Speaks on the 12th Anniversary."

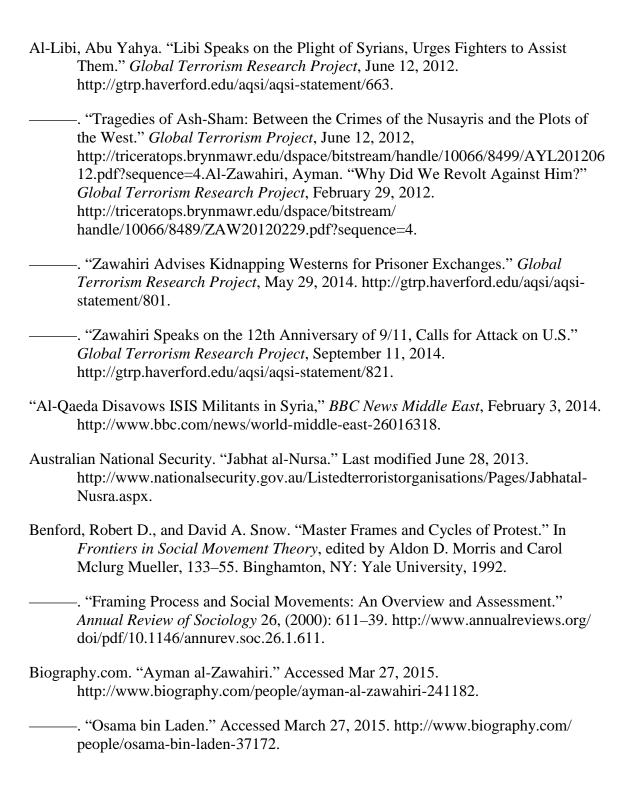[206] Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, 204.

ISIS.[207] In a battle for recruits, resources, and group survival, AQC is attempting to frame its organization as a more sensible alternative to its rival ISIS. The framing competition between al-Qaeda and ISIS is still ongoing but current trends demonstrate that the Islamic State's message is resonating more deeply with potential recruits.

This thesis has argued that AQC has only been able to survive due to its ability to adapt to a rapidly changing strategic environment by maintaining a malleable ideology, restructuring the organization's hierarchy, and constantly expanding its affiliates. Out of necessity al-Qaeda has transformed into a fractured network of loosely aligned groups that do not rely on instructions or funding from the central leadership. AQC provides an ideological narrative and a recognizable brand name that extremist groups use to build their own credentials and attract new recruits. AQC has been denied political opportunities and the ability to mobilize resources but it has successfully maintained a relevant ideology that is frequently tailored to exploit new opportunities. The Arab Spring presented AQC with previously unseen challenges but the group has survived and perhaps even been vindicated in its assertion that democratic transition is not possible while Muslim states continue to receive backing from the far enemy. AQC is by no means in a position of power however. Its core leadership is aging and becoming increasingly isolated from the current jihadi battlegrounds. It is imperative that studies on al-Qaeda framing strategies continue, especially as leadership roles shift from members who came to prominence in the Soviet-Afghan War to a younger generation of fighters. Al-Qaeda's numerous affiliates have primarily gained battlefield experience engaging in local struggles and it is conceivable that should one of these group's leaders assume the position of AQC's ideological leader that his priorities may diverge significantly from his predecessor's. AQC remains a major security threat and the study of the group's ideological narrative will remain a significant area of scholarship for the foreseeable future.

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[207] Aaron Y. Zelin, "The War Between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, no. 20 (June 2014), 6, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_20_Zelin.pdf.

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